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## XXVI. TOUCH IMAGES IN THE POETRY OF ROBERT BROWNING

"There's printing a book of 'Selections from R. B.' (*Sculptor* and poet) which is to popularize my old things; . . . " Thus wrote Robert Browning to his friend, W. W. Story, in the spring of 1862, humorously alluding to the joyous companionship in Story's studio two years earlier, when he had been spending as much as three hours daily, thumping the wet clay. Nothing but clay did he care for, "poor lost soul,"—so Mrs. Browning had at that time declared, for she grudged a little the time taken from his poetry. And this enthusiasm had been a matter of more than one winter. Very vivid is the memory of it, therefore, in 1862. "I try and see old friends," the poet writes, in the letter already quoted, "when my true *treat* would be an evening over the piles of unread books, or a morning with the old coat and wet clay. Oh, the days!"<sup>1</sup> Robert Browning, sculptor and poet; here is a key to unlock,—not, indeed, the heart, but at least some secrets of the brain and hand of the robust craftsman.

Had this enthusiasm and the opportunity to satisfy it come to him early enough, Browning might have developed into a sculptor of reputation superior to that of his American friend. Twenty years earlier, a speech in *Pippa Passes* indicates the inherent bent of his mind toward plastic expression. Though he is not yet familiar with it in actuality, the poet finds in the sculptor's art, as it were, a whole kit of verbal tools that fit naturally into his hand. Jules, the sculptor, is speaking:

But of the stuffs one can be master of,  
How I divined the capabilities!  
From the soft-rinded smoothening facile chalk  
That yields your outline to the air's embrace,  
Half-softened by a halo's pearly gloom;

---

<sup>1</sup> Henry James, *William Wetmore Story*, Boston, 1904, I. 114-118.

Down to the crisp imperious steel, so sure  
 To cut its one confided thought clean out  
 Of all the world. But marble!—'neath my tools  
 More pliable than jelly—as it were  
 Some clear primordial creature dug from depths  
 In the earth's heart, where itself breeds itself,  
 And whence all baser substance may be worked;  
 Refine it off to air, you may,—condense it  
 Down to the diamond;—is not metal there  
 When o'er the sudden speck my chisel trips?  
 —Not flesh, as flake off flake I scale, approach,  
 Lay bare those bluish veins of blood asleep?

Here a bent of mind is discernible which may also be traced in Browning's earliest as well as latest poetry, for he is peculiarly a poet of touch. The world of imagination which he creates is strikingly vivid and real; in it we have a sense of solidity, an atmosphere that envelops, an earth beneath the feet, hands that meet and clasp our own. He walks the common and uncommon ways, and nudges us as we walk with him. Everyone who reads Browning feels this. But accustomed as we all are to think of the poet's world as primarily, if not exclusively, a world of eye and ear, we permit a great deal of harsh criticism upon his rough lines: we have failed to see, and the friendliest critics have failed to point out to us, that though he offends the ear sometimes, yet he makes amends by the fulness, the richness, and the great range of the images of touch which he lavishes upon us. Tennyson, like Poe's angels, sits in a theatre to see a play of hopes and fears, but Browning flings himself into the arena, and from the solid earth reaches forth phantom hands that touch all mundane things and grasp at stars.

My earliest consciousness of this peculiar quality in Browning's poetry, came, strangely enough, not from the almost innumerable passages in which he uses the words 'fingers' and 'hands' and directly describes touch, but from passages which at first glance would seem to present images purely visual. These were the following:

'Mid the sharp short emerald wheat, scarce risen three fingers well,  
 The wild tulip, at end of its tube, blows out its great red bell

Like a thin clear bubble of blood, for the children to pick and sell (*Up at a Villa*).

Meantime, see the grape bunch they've brought you:

The rain-water slips

O'er the heavy blue bloom on each globe

Which the wasp to your lips

Still follows with fretful persistence:

. . . . .

Next, sip this weak wine

From the thin green glass flask, with its stopper

A leaf of the vine (*The Englishman in Italy*).

In such lines as these the poet projects his own personality into the thing described, so that when he says that the tulip *blows out* its great red bell, we have a feeling of active growth rather than a mere surface appearance of the flower. To a reader who is at all 'touch-minded,' the phrases, "thin, clear bubble of blood" and "sharp short emerald wheat" have what Mr. Berenson, criticising painting, calls "tactile values." So, also, have the words "thin green glass flask," which set teeth as well as ears on edge. In the very discord that offends the delicate ear, there is a quality that supplies a quite definite mental image related to the sensitive nerve ends of touch. The reader apprehends directly fine distinctions—by no means so well given in less concrete terms—of viscous tenuity, spiny rigidity, and vitreous fragileness. The lines,

Which the wasp to your lips

Still follows with fretful persistence

cause such a sympathetic tingling of the reader's own lips that he almost involuntarily puts up his hand to fend off the insect. And yet there are people so inveterately 'eye-minded' that they will instantly deny this. Mr. George E. Woodberry, for instance, told me some years ago that these lines from Browning's *Italian in England*,

I would grasp Metternich until

I felt his red wet throat distil

In blood through these two hands,

presented to his imagination solely a visual image. He saw in his mind's eye another's hand gripping Prince Metternich by

the throat. But whether or not the reader agree with me as to the lines already quoted, he will, I believe, if he but take the pains to read carefully, find in Browning's poetry a continual use of language implying, or directly embodying, images of touch. Two quite familiar quotations will serve to illustrate, one the descriptive, the other the figurative use:

Your soft hand is a woman of itself (*Andrea del Sarto*).

But all, the coarse world's thumb  
And finger failed to plumb (*Rabbi ben Ezra*).

Before taking up the discussion of Browning's poetry in greater detail, let us first consider some of the problems that naturally suggest themselves concerning the use of touch images in poetry generally, the strange reticence of critics on this matter, and the consequent implications. Since the thunders of Professor Babbitt's *New Laokoön* first muttered over our heads it has become increasingly dangerous for the critic to venture far from home without some sort of umbrella. I shall therefore tread softly and carry a large water-shed; let no one reprove me if when I raise it over some shivering cluster of images, it be seen to bear the strange device of 'Homer' or of 'Aristotle.'

The question is bound to arise, whether the poet has any right to exploit the field of touch to the neglect of visual and auditory harmonies. Someone, perhaps, will say that the poet should not try to be a sculptor in words; that he is confusing the arts, is going out of his domain, if there is great emphasis or great subtlety in his employment of touch. But what is the poet's domain? The difficulty in discussing this whole matter is largely a verbal one. Poets have always used touch images; the greatest poets have used them with great freedom. But our language is weak in critical terms just here; it has no single word at once clear and harmonious to stand for the sense of touch. Criticism, consequently, tends to the assumption that all the world may be apprehended by sight and hearing. One may speak of a poet's vision, and of his fine ear, but to speak of his touch is to risk

ambiguity, and one does not speak of his feeling unless one means his emotion. Burke, indeed, in his essay, *Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, treats of "beauty in feeling," though he does not go beyond the consideration of the aesthetic values of the direct sensation. Of this, Michaelangelo blind, delighting in the beauty of the antique sculpture over which he passes his hands, would be an apt illustration. Burke does not take up the matter of mental images of touch. In what terms, then, may we convey the idea that a given poet has great sensitiveness to tactile values and felicity in giving them verbal expression? The poets themselves, who make use of this faculty, ignore it in their denotation of the world of phenomena. Wordsworth says that he is still—

A lover of the meadows and the woods  
And mountains; and of all that we behold  
From this green earth; of all the mighty world  
Of eye and ear, both what they half create  
And what perceive.

And Browning, even he, says,

Eyes, ears took in their dole;  
Brain treasured up the whole.

Another difficulty, closely allied to the paucity of critical terms, and to some extent accounting for it, is the fact that the terms expressive of the sense of sight have a way of absorbing and including in their connotation qualities that belong properly to the sense of touch. Thus we speak of seeing a solid mass, a heavy weight, a cold landscape. And this is not entirely a matter of terms; it corresponds, of course, to the operation of our minds. Sight, not content with being "Lord of the visible earth," is so completely "Lord of the senses five" as to make us forget that by whatever means we primarily apprehend them, mass, weight, and temperature are known only through mental images that are tactual. As Mr. Berenson reminds us in the first pages of his *Florentine Painters of the Renaissance*:

Psychology has ascertained that sight alone gives us no accurate sense of the third dimension. In our infancy, long before we are conscious of the

process, the sense of touch, helped on by muscular sensations of movement, teaches us to appreciate depth, the third dimension, both in objects and in space. . . .

Later, we entirely forget the connection, although it remains true, that every time our eyes recognize reality, we are, as a matter of fact, giving tactile values to retinal impressions.

Possibly a reason for the lack of suitable critical terms to express the variety and relative intensity of touch perceptions and images may also be found in the fact that the tactual sense is diffused all over the body's surface, as well as partly within the body, whereas sight and hearing have the advantage of special, highly differentiated, and beautiful organs. The finger-tips often serve to represent the sense of touch, but obviously they bear no such perfect relation to it as the ears to hearing, or the eyes to sight.

Yet, however hampered the critic may feel in the lack of readily intelligible terms, the poet is generally untrammelled. The external world perceived by him is not solely a world of eye and ear, but a world of eye and ear and—to say nothing of nose and tongue—also of tactual nerves, a world of palpable forms, of touch. He is far less troubled by his medium of expression than is the painter. His domain is the universe; to whatever can be thought he has a prescriptive right, the right of use and of enjoyment proper to creative genius. Though our language lack the terms to describe the special field of touch images critically, it is patently rich enough in words to express this field vividly, creatively. The lack is in text-book terms, not in those which are directly descriptive, graphic.

If one thinks of the poet's mind as being a vast store house of mental images (the memory's record of all past sense perceptions) which one may classify as those of sight, of hearing, of touch, of taste, of smell, it is clear that the dominant groups are those of sight and hearing and touch. Any large or significant thought to be poetically expressed must clothe itself in images visual, auditory, or tactual. The so-called motor images, images of the sense of motion,

may for convenience be included with the tactual, or may be differentiated as motor-tactual. Taste and smell images cannot be employed readily save by suggestion, as through naming a food or a flower; and though very effective if sparingly used, if used with frequency tend to a cloying and heaviness. Job's rhetorical question,— which startled a laugh from Carlyle as he read aloud,—“Is there any taste in the white of an egg?”, is an exception that puts the rule to proof. ‘Wormwood’ and ‘gall’ may still be living images, but ‘bitter’ and ‘sweet’ have lost most of their original vigor, and have become mainly conceptual; that is, conveying abstract ideas without the tang of an image of taste. Even Keats, in the lines from *The Eve of St. Agnes*,

Into her dream he melted, as the rose  
Blendeth her odour with the violet,—

gives a suggestive rather than directly descriptive image. The special magic of Shelley's,

The wandering airs they faint  
On the dark, the silent stream,—  
The champak odours fall  
Like sweet thoughts in a dream;—

in the *Lines to an Indian Air*, exists rather in the strangeness of the word ‘champak’ than in any sense which an English reader has of the nature of the perfume, unless he look in the dictionary and discover that champak is a species of magnolia. No dictionary, however, can make known the quality of an odour that is wholly unfamiliar to us. Taste and smell, then, may be regarded as relatively of minor importance in poetry. There remains the choice between sight, hearing, and touch.

Now it has been darkly intimated by certain critics that images of touch are somehow cruder than those of vision; that coming more directly through the flesh, they partake of the peculiar frailty of the flesh. Thus, a very unpleasant imputation of coarseness of fibre, or at least of over-sensuousness, is already laid upon a poet whose poetry is found



to be dominated by such images. I believe that here, just as in the conventional ignoring of the field of tactual images in most criticism, wrong conclusions have been reached chiefly because the matter has not been sufficiently considered. Surely there is no more deeply rooted feeling of love and tender sheltering compassion than that which clings about the dim memories—subconscious though they be—of lying on one's mother's breast, within her circling embrace. Browning says, in *Christmas-Eve* (xi):

Love was the all-sufficient too;  
And seeing that, you see the rest:  
As a babe can find its mother's breast  
As well in darkness as in light,  
Love shut our eyes, and all seemed right.

For to the infant, its mother's is an infinite love, like that of God: hence the profound appeal to all hearts of that solemn scripture: "The eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms." This is a touch image, simple, sensuous, yet sublime. Indeed, if we desire moral sanction, the Bible will supply us with it in abundance. Graven images, but not mental images of touch, are forbidden by the decalogue. The following are characteristic simile and metaphor from the Bible:

As a thorn goeth up into the hand of a drunkard, so is a parable in the mouth of fools (*Prov.*, *xxvi*, 9).

For thou shalt heap coals of fire upon his head, and the Lord shall reward thee (*Prov.*, *xxv*, 22).

The question out of the whirlwind propounded to Job: "Canst thou bind the sweet influences of the Pleiades, or loose the bands of Orion?" extends the homely labor of the harvestfield into a metaphor that sweeps with cosmic grandeur the immensity of space; whereas, the infinite love of God is brought down to be comprehended of the common man in Judea, through the homely words of Christ, when he cries, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how

often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!"

To one who should object to touch-images on the ground that the classics do not recognise them, it is possible to appeal to Aristotle, who certainly approves a poet's identifying himself with his characters, not merely putting his scenes as far as may be before his eyes, but acting them out:

. . . the poet should even act his story with the very gestures of his personages. Given the same natural qualifications, he who feels the emotions to be described will be the most convincing.<sup>2</sup>

This capacity for projecting himself into his characters, if it is accompanied by mimetic action—as was notoriously the case with Dickens, who laughed and wept while composing—is very likely to result in the employment of the touch images as well as the abstract emotions thus mentally realized. And this faculty for acting the part of one's own creation, Aristotle himself points out, is not a matter of art, but is a special gift. It should not be necessary to enumerate the many instances in which Homer and Vergil employ direct description of touch in narrating moving accidents by flood and field, but it may be worth while to give an example from each, drawn from passages that do not concern battle or shipwreck. After Odysseus has found his aged father, Laertes, clothed in a filthy doublet and oxhide leggings, digging in the vineyard, and has seen him clutch the dust to shower it on his gray head, Homer makes us feel very vividly the sudden rush of tears that overcomes the man of many devices:

Then the heart of Odysseus was moved, and up through his nostrils throbbed anon the keen sting of sorrow at the sight of his dear father.<sup>3</sup>

From Vergil I choose the description of the applause at the start of the boat race:

The shores, hemmed in, roll back the voice; the beaten hills rebound with the clamor. *Aeneid*, v, ll. 149-150.

<sup>2</sup> *Poetics* 1455<sup>a</sup>, 32 (Bywater's translation).

<sup>3</sup> *Odyssey* XXIV (Butcher and Lang's translation).

It may be forcing a point to translate *resultant* as 'rebound' instead of merely re-echo; but *pulsati colles* are certainly 'beaten' or 'whipped' hills. This is a case of an image of sound interpreted or made more vivid through an image of touch. Since sound waves are actually perceptible at times through touch—even deaf-mutes can keep time to music which they feel—no one should be troubled by such poetic figures. The self-styled 'imagists' occasionally push the matter farther than seems natural, in order to outdo their predecessors; but Miss Amy Lowell could appeal to the *pulsati colles* should she be chid for the following lines in her poem, *Music*,

The neighbor sits in his window and plays the flute.  
From my bed I can hear him,  
And the round notes flutter and tap about the room,  
And hit against each other,  
Blurring to unexpected chords.

. . . . .

The flute-notes push against my ears and lips,  
And I go to sleep, dreaming.

It is quite possible that critics of poetry, in view of the domination of the sense of sight, and of the paucity of critical terms for the discussion of touch images, as well as of the ill-considered aversion to what is thought to be merely fleshly, have overlooked, or at least slighted an important field of creative imagination, and consequently have done some injustice to poets who are especially strong in that field. Such a poet, as I have already said, was Robert Browning.

The poet has an idea to express in the words and measure suitable to his conception of poetry. This idea comes to him in the form of mental images. If the mental images are dominantly visual, it signifies that his store of visual images is richer and more readily accessible than his store of tactual or auditory images: he is, as they say, "eye-minded." If, on the other hand, these images are dominantly tactual, it signifies that his store of tactual images is richer and more

readily accessible than his store of auditory and visual images: he is, to coin a term, "finger-tip-minded." And to be dominant in any poet's word-hoard, tactual images need not be more numerous than visual images; it is sufficient that they bear to the latter a strikingly higher proportion than is commonly the case. I should not be prepared to say that Browning's touch images are more numerous than his images of vision: I do say that they bear a far higher proportion to the latter than do the touch images of most poets. Anyone, I believe, would grant at once that Tennyson is decidedly a poet to the ear and eye,—a maker, in Dr. Van Dyke's phrase, of melodies and pictures; to me, Browning seems as obviously the poet *par excellence* of the third dimension—the architect, sculptor, poet to the fingertips.

Professor Herford, in the ninth chapter of his illuminating *Robert Browning*, comes very near to propounding what I wish to elucidate in the present article; but Professor Herford still clings to the eye and ear convention:

Browning's restlessly aspiring temperament worked under the control of an eye and ear that fastened with peculiar emphasis and eagerness upon all the limits, the dissonances, the angularities that Shelley's harmonizing fancy dissolved away. . . . He lacked the stranger and subtler sensibilities of eye and ear, to which Nature poetry of the nineteenth century owes so much. His senses were efficient servants to an active brain, not magicians flinging dazzling spells into the air before him or mysterious music across his path.

He does, however, speak of Browning's tactual sense:

The implicit realism of his eye and ear was fortified by acute tactual and muscular sensibilities. He makes us vividly aware of surface and texture, of space, solidity, shape. Matter with him is not the translucent, tenuous, half-spiritual substance of Shelley, but aggressively massive and opaque, tense with solidity. And he had in an eminent degree the quick and eager apprehension of space-relations which usually goes with these developed sensibilities of eye and muscle. . . . But it was only late in life that this acute plasticity and concreteness found its outlet.

When first I pondered over these passages in Professor Herford's book, it seemed to me that further discussion was

unnecessary. But on more mature consideration it became apparent that my own idea was distinctly different in two capital respects. In the first place, Professor Herford attacks Browning's poetic eye and ear, pointing out certain peculiarities, weaknesses, limitations in the auditory and visual fields. It is my purpose, on the contrary, to bring forward the peculiar strength, variety, and fineness of the poet's sense of touch,—pointing out what seems to me the positive domination of his mind by the tactual field.

In the second place, Professor Herford, in his further discussion, attributes the poet's preoccupation with clefts and wedges; rough surfaces, sudden contrasts, *et cetera*, mainly to a physiological cause, i. e., to the savage energy and vitality of the man: "No one can miss the element of savage energy in Browning." And he adds that with his savage energy he had a "joy in savage images," and an "even more pronounced joy in savage words." Now my interpretation of the same phenomena—and of others closely allied—finds their cause in a mental bias; not in a physiological trait, but in one psychological. There are other poets just as athletic as Browning: Tennyson was a man of powerful physique; surely Byron was just as full of savage energy; Shelley was physically much more sensitive. But in none of these was the swiftly dividing thought so quick to clothe itself on with images predominantly or purely tactual.

Browning is not content to tell us how Caliban looks: but by sympathetic impulses of the tactual imagination he presents the monster—

With elbows wide, fists clenched to prop his chin.  
And, while he kicks both feet in the cool slush,  
And feels about his spine small eft-things course,  
Run in and out each arm, and make him laugh:  
And while above his head a pompion-plant,  
Coating the cave-top as a brow its eye,  
Creeps down to touch and tickle hair and beard,

gazing out to sea, where the sunbeams "weave a spider-web."

Not because of savage energy, then, nor, as I understand it, because of any stereotropism—suggestive of noxious insects and timid furtive creatures—does Browning rejoice in cleft and wedge figures, in rough surfaces and angularities. Naturally, a poet who is tactually minded will express vigorous action with great concreteness. But the same man in a mood of gentleness or tenderness may employ images of touch the most refined and subtle. This is not strange: it is but a finer use of the same faculty. So Browning is often harsh and rough-handed; yet equally characteristic of his poetic mode is a use of touch of the utmost delicacy, of a quality almost immaterial, spiritual:

Yet rocks split,—and the blow-ball does no more,  
Quivers to feathery nothing at a touch (*Giuseppe Caponsacchi*).

I have already, in one of my first paragraphs, alluded to the fact that there are innumerable passages in which Browning mentions hands or fingers, or in some manner directly describes or implies touch; and I have given one example that has indeed something of savage energy—that in which the Italian in England wishes he might throttle Prince Metternich. But in the same poem the Italian actually does employ his hand in benediction:

I could not choose  
But kiss her hand, and lay my own  
Upon her head—"This faith was shown  
To Italy, our mother, she  
Uses my hand and blesses thee."

If the reader cannot feel the tactile values in these lines, and regards them as merely descriptions of action quite complete when visualized, let him consider whether the very great number of similar passages in Browning does not in itself indicate a remarkable prepossession with ideas of touch. I do not expect the eye-minded to feel touch-images as they read: certainly not, unless they hold the attention steadily upon the thought and try to feel. I can give only a few examples. The whole volume of poems must show whether

or not these are representative. It is my purpose throughout, moreover, not to illustrate the frequent mention of hands and fingers in strong action, but rather to emphasize what may be too easily overlooked—the poet's more delicate and sensitive touch. When Lippo Lippi says,

Old Aunt Lapaccia trussed me with one hand,  
(Its fellow was a stinger as I knew)—

we say that is Browningsque. But are not the hands in the following passages equally characteristic?

Then steps a sweet angelic slip of a thing  
Forward, puts out a soft palm—

. . . . .

I scuttle off  
To some safe bench behind, not letting go  
The palm of her, the little lily thing (*Fra Lippo Lippi*).

While not a man of them broke rank and spoke  
. . . . .  
Or caught my hand and pressed it like a hand! (*In a Balcony*).

. . . . . he spoke not, but slow  
Lifted up the hand slack at his side, till he laid it with care  
Soft and grave, but in mild settled will, on my brow: through my hair  
The large fingers were pushed, and he bent back my head, with kind  
power—  
All my face back, intent to peruse it, as men do a flower (*Saul*).

And shut the money into this small hand  
. . . . .  
Here by the window with your hand in mine

. . . . .  
Your soft hand is a woman of itself,  
And mine the man's bared breast she curls inside.

. . . . .  
This low-pulsed forthright craftsman's hand of mine

. . . . .  
Let my hands frame your face in your hair's gold (*Andrea Del Sarto*).

So hush,—I will give you this leaf to keep:  
See, I shut it inside the sweet cold hand! (*Evelyn Hope*).

Descriptions of women, real or imagined, involve images of touch; thus re-live women of eighteenth century Venice and girls of ancient Rome:

On her neck the small face buoyant, like a bell-flower  
on its bed,  
O'er the breast's superb abundance where a man might  
base his head?

. . . . .  
Dear dead women, with such hair, too—what's become  
of all the gold  
Used to hang and brush their bosoms? I feel chilly and  
grown old (*A Toccata of Galuppi's*).

That quick the round smooth cord of gold,  
This coiled hair on your head, unrolled,  
Fell down you like a gorgeous snake  
The Roman girls were wont, of old,  
When Rome there was, for coolness' sake  
To let lie curling o'er their bosoms (*In a Gondola*).

One remembers, also, the description of Fifine's ear, "Thin as a dusk-leaved rose carved from a cocoa-nut," in which the words *thin* and *carved* suggest a sculpturesque quality allied to touch.

A kiss is itself a touch; it may be as intense as that of the deaf mute in the group by Woolner, as airy as the wing of a moth, as lightly given as that bestowed on a flower:

Only the prism's obstruction shows aright  
The secret of a sunbeam, breaks its light  
Into the jeweled bow from blankest white;  
So may a glory from defect arise:  
Only by Deafness may the vexed Love wreak  
Its insuppressive sense on brow and cheek (*Deaf and Dumb*).

When my lips just touched your cheek—  
Touch which let my soul come through? (*Ferishtah's  
Fancies, xi*).

The moth's kiss, first!  
The bee's kiss now! (*In a Gondola*).

Bud, if I kiss you, 't is that you blow not,  
Mind,—the shut pink mouth opens never!  
For while it pouts, her fingers wrestle—



Till round they turn and down they nestle—  
Is not the dear mark still to be seen? (*Garden Fancies*).

It is of a flower that the poet makes this confession, comparing it somewhat disparagingly to a jewel,

Flower—I never fancied, jewel—I profess you!  
Bright I see and soft I feel the outside of a flower (*Magical Nature*).

Descriptions of paintings full of touch images are the little poem, *A Face*, and *The Guardian-Angel*, from which I take the following:

If one could have that little head of hers  
Painted upon a background of pale gold,  
Such as the Tuscan's early art prefers!  
No shade encroaching on the matchless mould  
Of those two lips, which should be opening soft  
In the pure profile; not as when she laughs,  
For that spoils all: but rather as if aloft  
Yon hyacinth, she loves so, leaned its staff's  
Burthen of honey-colored buds to kiss  
And capture 'twixt the lips apart for this.  
Then her lithe neck, three fingers might surround,  
How it should waver on the pale gold ground  
Up to the fruit-shaped, perfect chin it lifts! (*A Face*).

Dear and great Angel, wouldst thou only leave  
That child, when thou hast done with him, for me!

. . . . .  
Then shall I feel thee step one step, no more,  
From where thou standest now, to where I gaze,  
—And suddenly my head is covered o'er

. . . . .  
. . . and I shall feel thee guarding

. . . . .  
And wilt thou bend me low  
Like him, and lay, like his, my hands together,  
And lift them up to pray, and gently tether  
Me, as thy lamb there, with thy garment's spread?

If this was ever granted, I would rest  
My head beneath thine, while thy healing hands  
Close-covered both my eyes beside thy breast,  
Pressing the brain, which too much thought expands  
(*The Guardian Angel*).

Somewhat similar to the preceding is a kind of pathetic fallacy by which Browning invests nature and inanimate objects with his own feeling or whim. A landscape basks with knees out-thrust; hills are giants; an old book tossed into the hollow of a tree is tickled by worms and insects:

How did he like it when the live creatures  
 Tickled and toused and browsed him all over . . . ?  
 (*Sibrandus Schafnaburgensis*).

Some think fireflies pretty, when they mix in the corn and  
 mingle,  
 Or thrud the stinking hemp till the stalks of it seem atingle  
 (*Up at a Villa*).

Oh, the good gigantic smile of the brown old earth  
 This autumn morning, How he sets his bones  
 To bask i' the sun, and thrusts out knees and feet  
 For the ripple to run over in its mirth (*James Lee's Wife, vii*).

The earth heaved beneath like a breast  
 Where the wretch was safe pressed (*Instans Tyrannus*).

The hills, like giants at a hunting, lay,  
 Chin upon hand (*Childe Roland*).

So, also, in describing sculpture Browning projects sentience into cold marble:

. . . a vault, see; thick  
 Black shade about the ceiling, though fine slits  
 Across the buttress suffer light by fits  
 Upon a marvel in the midst. Nay, stoop—  
 A dullish gray-streaked cumbrous font, a group  
 Round it,—each side of it, where'er one sees,—  
 Upholds it; shrinking Caryatides  
 Of just-tinged marble like Eve's lilled flesh  
 Beneath her maker's finger when the fresh  
 First pulse of life shot brightening the snow.  
 The font's edge burdens every shoulder, so  
 They muse upon the ground (*Sordello*).

And how your statues' hearts must swell (*In a Gondola*).

One loves a baby face, with violets there,  
 Violets instead of laurel in the hair,  
 As those were all the little locks could bear

. . . . .

Here's John the Smith's rough-hammered head. Great eye,  
Gross jaw and griped lips do what granite can  
To give you the crown-grasper. What a man! (*Protus*).

First the flow of water, then the feeling of air: perhaps these are the most delicate perceptions possible to touch,—that is, to actual sensation. How far Browning tends to perceive and interpret tactually things that others would perceive as merely visual may be illustrated by the description of a stream of fresh water flowing into the sea:

the lukewarm brine  
O' the lazy sea her stream thrusts far amid,  
A crystal spike 'twixt two warm walls of wave (*Caliban upon Setebos*).

Certainly this is not a visual figure; it is not something the reader can see. Compare, for instance, Tennyson's streams in the land of the Lotos-Eaters:

A land of streams! some, like a downward smoke,  
Slow-dropping veils of thinnest lawn, did go;

a description in which the water is perceived solely by the visual sense. Tennyson, indeed, sometimes interprets touch itself in terms of sight:

The pale blood of the wizard at her touch  
Took gayer colors, like an opal warmed (*Merlin and Vivien*).

It is not that Tennyson is devoid of images of touch, as for instance,

Then thrice essay'd with tenderest-touching terms,  
To sleek her ruffled peace of mind, in vain (*Merlin and Vivien*).

but that far more numerous, and more fine, and more characteristic are his figures and images of sight and sound. With Browning the more numerous, the more fine, the more characteristic are the images and figures of touch. But to continue with the touch of water:

Dip your arm o'er the boat-side, elbow-deep,  
As I do: thus: were death so unlike sleep  
Caught this way? Death's to fear from flame or steel,  
Or poison, doubtless; but from water—feel! (*In a Gondola*).

The copper couch and one clear nice  
Cool squirt of water o'er your bust,  
The right thing to extinguish lust! (*Apparent Failure*).

. . . the cool silver shock  
Of the plunge in a pool's living water, the hunt of the bear,  
And the sultriness showing the lion is couched in his  
lair (*Saul*).

Full well I know the thing I grasp, as if intent  
To hold,—my wandering wave,—will not be grasped at all:  
The solid-seeming grasped, the handful great or small  
Must go to nothing, glide through fingers fast enough  
(*Fine at the Fair, lxvi*).

Not only does the swimmer feel the water, but the water  
itself feels the touch of the rock, and the breath of the air:

Thither the waters tend; they freshen as they haste,  
At feel o' the night-wind, though, by cliff and cliff em-  
braced (*Ibid. lxiii*).

Jules, the sculptor, in the passage already quoted from  
*Pippa Passes*, speaks of the air's embrace; and indicates the  
extremes of substance, thus:

Refine it off to air, you may,—condense it  
Down to the diamond (*Pippa Passes*).

Browning rejoices in the caress of the unseen element:

Florence lay out on the mountain-side.  
  
River and bridge and street and square  
Lay mine, as much at my beck and call,  
Through the live translucent bath of air  
As the sights in a magic crystal ball (*Old Pictures in  
Florence*).

Silence and passion, joy and peace,  
An everlasting wash of air (*Two in the Campagna*).

He is sensitive, too, to an electric quality in the air:

One long shudder thrilled  
All the tent till the very air tingled, then sank and was  
still (*Saul, x*).

Sound, being a vibration of the air, and partially perceptible, through touch, is naturally associated with motion, as for instance:

*Bang-whang-whang* goes the drum, *tootle-te-tootle* the fife;  
No keeping one's haunches still: it's the greatest pleasure  
in life (*Up at a Villa—Down in the City*).

But Browning goes much farther, and translates the sound waves into something palpable, as a mist, a web; or even something having the solidity of architecture:

Would that the structure brave, the manifold music I build,  
Bidding my organ obey, calling its keys to their work,  
Claiming each slave of the sound, at a touch, as when  
Solomon willed  
Armies of angels that soar, legions of demons that lurk,  
. . . pile him a palace straight, to pleasure the princess  
he loved!

Would it might tarry like his, the beautiful buidling  
of mine,  
This which my keys in a crowd pressed and importuned  
to raise! (*Abt Vogler*).

Alcamo's song enmeshes the lulled Isle,  
Woven into the echoes left erewhile  
By Nina, one soft web of song (*Sordello*).

The air broke into a mist with bells (*The Patriot*).

Tennyson, conversely, sometimes translates actual contact into images of sound:

With Arthur in the fight which all day long  
Rang by the white mouth of the violent Glem;  
And in the four loud battles by the shore  
Of Duglas (*Launcelot and Elaine*).

Not only sound, but darkness and light, the very faculty of vision itself, are by Browning associated with or interpreted through images of touch. "Thick darkness" is, to be sure, so common a figure as to excite no remark; but darkness, in Browning, may become solid:

Mountains and valleys mingling made one mass  
Of black with void black heaven: the earth's confines,  
The sky's embrace,—below, above, around,  
All hardened into black without a bound.

Fill up a swart stone chalice to the brim  
 With fresh-squeezed yet fast-thickening poppy-juice:  
 See how the sluggish jelly, late a-swim,  
 Turns marble to the touch of who would loose  
 The solid smooth, grown jet from rim to rim,  
 By turning round the bowl! So night can fuse  
 Earth with her all-comprising sky (*Pan and Luna*).

In *Saul*, the sunbeam which reveals the king to David "bursts" through the tent roof. And David thinks of the noontide sun as of a swordlike destroyer:

Then I tuned my harp,—took off the lilies we twine  
 round its chords  
 Lest they snap 'neath the stress of the noontide—those  
 sunbeams like swords! (*Saul, v*).

Professor Herford finds in this situation an example of vivid contrast in color—"the blue lilies about the harp of golden-haired David." When Abner says:

Yet how my heart leaps, O beloved! God's child with his dew  
 On thy gracious gold hair, and those lilies still living and blue  
 Just broken to twine round thy harp-strings, as if no wild heat  
 Were now raging to torture the desert! (*Saul, ii*).

But, as is characteristic with Browning, these simple notes of color are subservient to the larger contrast, the contrast of freshness, dew, and life, with the heat and drouth of the desert, and with the darkness and torpor of Saul. David runs "o'er sand burnt to powder," and groping his way on hands and knees "on the slippery grass-patch" feels for the fold-skirts of the great tent's inner enclosure. At first he sees nothing but the blacker blackness of the main prop and a gigantic figure against it—

Then a sunbeam, that burst through the tent-roof, showed  
 Saul (*Saul, iii*).

The same poem contains descriptions of stars and of dawn which are strongly tactual, or motor-tactual:

For I wake in the gray dewy covert, while Hebron upheaves  
 The dawn struggling with night on his shoulder, and  
 Kidron retrieves  
 Slow the damage of yesterday's sunshine (*Saul, xiv*).

And the stars of night beat with emotion, and tingled  
 and shot  
 Out in fire the strong pain of pent knowledge: but I  
 fainted not,  
 For the Hand still impelled me at once and supported,  
 suppressed  
 All the tumult, and quenched it with quiet, and holy behest  
 (*Saul, xix*).

Daylight in the opening lines of *Pippa Passes* is a molten liquid mass that, at first suppressed, seethes up over the brim of night:

Day!  
 Faster and more fast,  
 O'er night's brim, day boils at last:  
 Boils, pure gold, o'er the cloud-cup's brim  
 Where spurting and suppressed it lay,  
 For not a froth-flake touched the rim  
 Of yonder gap in the solid gray  
 Of the eastern cloud, an hour away;  
 But forth one wavelet, then another, curled,  
 Till the whole sunrise, not to be suppressed,  
 Rose, reddened, and its seething breast  
 Flickered in bounds, grew gold, then overflowed the  
 world (*Pippa Passes*).

Vision itself becomes tactual:

In the grasp of my steady stare—  
 . . . . .  
 In the clutch of my steady ken—  
 . . . . .  
 I imprint her fast  
 On the void at last (*Mesmerism*).

When I do come, she will speak not, she will stand,  
 Either hand  
 On my shoulder, give her eyes the first embrace  
 Of my face (*Love Among the Ruins*).

And in a figure of speech the sensitive eye is wounded by a mere gesture simulating touch:

Touch us o' the pupil of our honor, then,  
 Not actually,—since so you slay outright,—  
 But by a gesture simulating touch (*Dominus Hyacinthus*).

I shall conclude my quotations from Browning with some examples of his use of touch images in characteristic figures. I believe these similes and metaphors, some of which give voice to the poet's essential philosophy, will not be fully apprehended unless the reader receives them as something more than merely visual.

Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp  
Or what's a heaven for? (*Andrea del Sarto*).

He fixed thee 'mid this dance  
Of plastic circumstance,  
This present, thou, forsooth, would fain arrest:  
Machinery just meant  
To give thy soul its bent,  
Try thee and turn thee forth, sufficiently impressed (*Rabbi Ben Ezra*).

I am held up, amid the nothingness,  
By one or two truths only—thence I hang,  
And there I live—the rest is death or dream,  
All but those points of my support. I think  
Of what I saw at Rome once in the Square  
O' the Spaniards, opposite the Spanish House:  
There was a foreigner had trained a goat,  
A shuddering white woman of a beast,  
To climb up, stand straight on a pile of sticks  
Put close, which gave the creature room enough:  
When she was settled there, he, one by one,  
Took away all the sticks, left just the four  
Whereon the little hoofs did really rest,  
There she kept firm, all underneath was air.  
So, what I hold by, are my prayer to God,  
My hope . . . (*Pompilia*).

He laid a hand on me that burned all peace,  
All joy, all hope, and last all fear away,  
Dipping the bough of life, so pleasant once,  
In fire which shrivelled leaf and bud alike (*Giuseppe Caponsacchi*).

Then drench her in repose though death's self pour  
The plenitude of quiet—help us, God (*Ibid*).

With me, faith means perpetual unbelief  
Kept quiet like the snake 'neath Michael's foot



Who stands calm just because he feels it writhe (*Bishop  
Blougram's Apology*).

While the great bishop rolled him out a mind  
Long crumpled, till creased consciousness lay smooth (*Ibid.*).

Then we began to ride. My soul  
Smoothed itself out, a long-cramped scroll  
Freshening and fluttering in the wind (*The Last Ride Together*).

While man knows partly but conceives beside,  
Creeps ever on from fancies to the fact,  
And in this striving, this converting air  
Into a solid he may grasp and use,  
Finds progress, man's distinctive mark alone (*A Death  
in the Desert*).

The distinction between the eye-and-ear type of imagination and the muscle-and-nerve (motor-tactual) type becomes clear if one compares Tennyson's *Crossing the Bar* with Browning's *Prospice*. The predominance of touch images in Browning may be tested, moreover, in the following manner: let the reader take those characteristic poems, *Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came* and *Rabbi Ben Ezra*, and slowly reading them, ask himself just how much of their imagery could be directly apprehended by a person blind and deaf from birth—a person, that is to say, whose world is purely tactual. I believe this a fair test, for one poem is largely external description, the other almost wholly abstract thought.

For my own part the discovery of the predominance of touch images in Browning has been a key that unlocked a treasury of poetic expression: the rough lines of the poet are better understood; the most harmonious fraught with a deeper eloquence. I not only forgive but enjoy "Ere mortar dab brick" in *The Grammarian's Funeral*, and "Patient on altar-step planting a weary toe" in *Old Pictures in Florence*, no longer regarding them as merely clever tricks to make rimes with "fabric" and "San Spirito." Even "Irks care the crop full bird" has ceased to terrify. On the other hand, the fulness, richness, and great range of this poet's touch

imagery,—scarcely more than suggested by the random examples I have given,—will be found, by those who read him attentively, to contribute almost as much to the essential charm and beauty of his work as to its strength and vividness.

Who else but Browning lifts a spiritual hand from earth to heaven, and feels God's finger touch the soul on earth?

This eve intense with yon first trembling star  
We seem to pant and reach; scarce aught between  
The earth that rises and the heaven that bends (*In a  
Balcony*).

But here is the finger of God, a flash of the will that can  
(*Abt Vogler*).

And like the hand which ends a dream,  
Death, with the might of his sunbeam,  
Touches the flesh and the soul awakes (*The Flight of the  
Duchess*).

JOHN KESTER BONNELL  
(Deceased September 30, 1921).